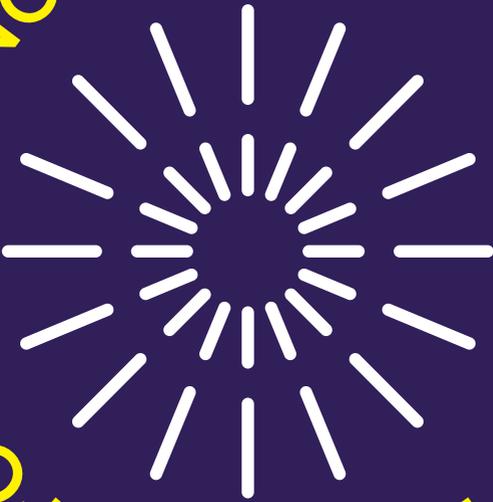


Laura
Aldridge

MAKE SPACE FOR EVERYBODY



MAKE TIME FOR DIFFERENCE



Artlink

From the beginning of March 2020 through to the present we have asked different artists and thinkers to respond to issues that were being unearthed as Covid-19 took its toll on our communities. Each writer was asked to respond to a simple brief that in some way related to their lived experience, providing the opportunity to open up these issues, to better understand what we could and should have in common.

**MAKE SPACE FOR EVERYBODY.
MAKE TIME FOR DIFFERENCE.**

LAURA ALDRIDGE



I am showing these images that I did not take because I was completely absorbed in what was happening around me. I am standing with my feet on the cold concrete floor of Tramway surrounded by high emotions, by engaged people, busy musicians, monumental artwork and giant red inflatable balls. Looking over towards a group in which I stand in that has gathered around a golden blazer wearing trumpet player who is playing his instrument onto one of the balls as it sits in the lap of a woman in a wheelchair. The group is smiling unconsciously, open mouthed and happy. I remember and recognise my own feelings in the images, my own experience of this uplifting, celebratory and life-affirming event that is mirrored by their bodies and shared between us.

This unforgettable Artlink curated event was developed and orchestrated by artist Wendy Jacob in collaboration with people with profound and multiple

learning difficulties. It featured a number of giant red weather balloons and community brass band *Brass Aye*? As they played, they moved around the space engaging with the audience, the balloons conducted sounds from the brass musical instruments that could be felt when you made contact with them. It was a loud, inclusive, sonic celebration, the collective engagement of a diverse audience and moments of pure joy.

In over 20 years of visiting art galleries and museums I have never experienced anything like it. An event that featured artwork informed by the sensory sensibilities of individuals with PMLD, or even to be present at an event or exhibition where they are considered and included within a diverse audience. I keep coming back to this thought and it is shocking. Where have they all been? The people that worked with Wendy? The people who attended her event that have complex needs and learning difficulties? Why are they missing from our arts community, from our arts programming and our conversations? Why are they not a part of the cultural life that we all believe celebrates and promotes difference and inclusivity? What does diversity really mean in this context if discussions around it tend to only focus on gender, race and disability; with the latter being addressed primarily as a physical access issue by art galleries. Unintentionally, people with complex developmental and/or cognitive disabilities (PMLD) find themselves not included in cultural spaces, despite there being simple solutions to ensure their involvement.

In her guide *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*, Carolyn Lazard asserts, "It is critical to address not just the infrastructure but the very exhibitions and programs that make an institution accessible. Do your exhibitions, screenings, performances and talks reflect the community that

you want to bring into your space? Do they address the concerns, needs and discourses of said community? How can institutions think through their programming and exhibitions in holistic ways that fold into and expand out from various communities?" As a community it is our collective responsibility to ensure that everyone can feel involved and included in what takes place within Scottish culture, facilitated within environments where all needs can be met. This activity needs to become an integrated part of cultural activity rather than an add-on in response to funding requirements. As Lazard states, "The ideal arts space is simple: it's one in which art and culture are not sequestered from the lived experience of artists and their communities."

I believe that every person should have the freedom to take part in a full and culturally rich life, regardless. One where they can learn, grow and thrive.

As a child I was the not so proud incumbent of a debilitating shyness. Up until my late teens I could barely bring myself to speak to a stranger, but I could always make things. Creativity became my way of communicating, an alternate voice and way of understanding things when words weren't enough.

My mother used to look at what I had made and tell me that she had no idea where I got my 'creative bones' from, that she could not make anything. Confused, I would point out that her creativity was evidenced in the curtains she had made, or the clothes she constructed. I would argue that gardening is creative, making a cake, cooking, decorating too. It's too easy to erect false distinctions, between those that can make and those that can't, between high and low art, what I am talking about here is art in its widest sense. Art as something that is much more social, that involves many different people in the making process.

For the last thirteen years, give or take a residency here and a teaching job there, I have worked with Artlink. I have been part of an ongoing sensory workshop, working with other artists and adults with profound and multiple learning difficulties within a day centre in Midlothian. As a teaching experience it has had the most positively disruptive effect on my own practice. Challenging every one of my perceptions about haptic experience and the role of the arts with people with PMLD . Teaching me to go slowly and notice the individuals pleasure in touch, sound and colour; to question and interrogate the difference between hearing and listening, seeing and looking, touching and feeling. To understand that differing amalgams of hearing, seeing and touching are the physical means that enable perception and that when we slow down our actions, taking time to notice the detail, we are uncovering very different perspectives of what we take for granted.

In one form or another creativity is what we all have in common. It is a form of universal communication, creating spaces and moments of self-expression in which any individual, regardless, has the freedom to play, experiment, teach, learn, inform, share and make choices.

As part of my everyday, art galleries, museums and theatres have provided me with experiences of worlds beyond my own. Experiences I know I take for granted when I see the incredible obstacles people with PMLD face on a daily basis. One of the biggest barriers is the negative expectation of others. Surface judgements made about an individual's worth, based on assumptions around their intellectual capacity and abilities to communicate. Hindering their inclusion and impacting negatively on their quality of life. Put very simply, if you can't understand what it is to communicate meaning then you must have nothing to say. If you can't produce in the terms we all understand

then you are of no value. Such conjecture greatly limits the opportunities that are available.

My experience of working in partnership with adults with PMLD in sensory-based art workshops tells me otherwise. Just because an individual cannot communicate through language or sign does not mean they have nothing to say. All you have to do is take the time to create opportunities that unearth new forms of non-verbal and relevant communication. Through these opportunities we open up new communication channels that had previously not existed, and when that happens our work together can really begin.

People with PMLD are often denied access to a creative life. Very little is expected from them and little is on offer to challenge them. Adults become infantilised and over-protected. Challenging behaviour resulting from frustration can often mean that anything seen to pacify is a positive, and anything that challenges is to be avoided. But passivity can be stifling of an individual's personality, their eccentricities and their potential. The space that art provides is an active one, one that can challenge and change what are often quite reductive ways of engaging with adults with PMLD. Seeking reactions through participation, we take time to build up an understanding of the individual, learning what their interests are, what excites and stimulates, what brings joy, and what can empower that individual to direct the activity of the workshop.

Within each workshop I am a learner for whom understanding comes in many lived and experiential forms, and is never owned or prescriptive. I am employed by Artlink as an artist, not a lecturer, not a workshop leader, not an art therapist nor a tutor. My ability to take time, being patient, watching,

observing detail and my persistence is key in the endeavour, the process and the act of learning. The person, who I collaborate with, is the expert and I am there to learn something new from them and what I learn directs and informs the work we do together. Within these collaborations perspectives are explored, through experiments with light, sound, colour and texture. We do not produce fixed or static objects like paintings or ceramic bowls, but something much more social, experimental and experiential to its core. Through time and tenacity, I learn to understand how a person chooses and then find ways to use those preferences to involve them more fully in the creative process. This approach is time consuming, it is slow, casual and non evasive - the inverse of intensive interaction - we have to go slowly, to find ways to pique curiosity, creating the right environment for activity to happen. It is vital.

Perhaps it's best if I talk about one of my collaborators. I don't think she would mind.

I have worked with Isla for around 6 years. Within our sessions together we have gotten to know each other, we have built up trust and know what to expect of each other. I know that on a good day Isla prefers loud over quiet, fast over slow, and rough over smooth. Through trial and error I have come to learn that Isla also enjoys and responds to vibrant colour, in particular colour seen in blacklight.

The first day that Isla deliberately made a series of small, careful abstract drawings using fluorescent pens on a UV light box was beyond memorable. Previously, when handed a pen and paper Isla would scribble aimlessly, looking away as she moved the pen back and forth, like she was

performing an action she knew was expected of her, going through the motions. This blacklight drawing was something new, something she engaged with in a way I hadn't seen before, staring closely at the marks she was making, smiling and with real intention.

It was a new way of working that I knew would open up metaphorical art doors to new opportunities for Isla. In these moments when we make this real connection, we both felt wide-awake: ready to absorb, we are like a set of walkie-talkies set to both transmit and receive. This feels electric. Figuring through creative involvement how an individual engages, builds a complex and mutual understanding from which the individual can truly begin to direct their own activity; shaping not only what we do together but the directions we will go in next.

In 2022 Artlink is due to present an exhibition of artwork work made with and for people with PMLD. I view the work we do in our sensory workshops as remarkable and I believe this way of being together and of taking the time to learn from each other is worth sharing. The perspectives of people with PMLD are not included within our society and they should be. Their voices are not heard, their interests and needs are not catered for in our art galleries and museums and they need to be. Sharing these new immersive works in new inclusive ways is an opportunity to rewrite the narrative around people with complex and profound learning disabilities and for us all to share the naked joy of being in the artwork together.

I gain the most when I am able to find common ground with others, when we make a connection. In these dark times it is very necessary to be open to changing perceptions, connecting to different forms of creativity that will

make us all feel good, better on the inside; more alive, kinder, compassionate and full of empathy. More able to be in this together.

The exhibition will bring awareness; the artwork will build a bridge.

Artlink

Established in 1984, Artlink is an arts and disability organisation. We believe participation in the arts has an important role to play in realising personal and social change.

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